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SUBJECT: PROPOSED BAVARIAN ISLAMIC ACADEMY HIGHLIGHTS
CHALLENGES OF MUSLIM INTEGRATION

REF: MUNICH 218

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Classified By: Consul General Eric G. Nelson. Reasons: 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A controversial proposal for an Islamic academy in Munich illustrates some of the challenges of balancing integration and security concerns in a conservative German state. The academy, to be funded by the UAE, would be a first-of-its-kind proposal by IVLP grantee Imam Benjamin Idriz of the Penzberg Islamic Community to educate imams in Munich in the German language. The academy, says Idriz, would help integrate Muslims into German society. Bavarian Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials, however, have raised misgivings, arguing that the Penzberg Community has been associated with the Turkish Islamic organization Milli Gorus (MG), which is under observation by the Federal and Bavarian Offices for the Protection of the Constitution as a threat to the constitutional order. Some local officials and clergy have rushed to support the Penzberg Congregation, and various opposition state legislators have alleged a smear campaign by some Bavarian politicians. Although the MOI is not formally able to block the project, the future of the academy remains unclear, in part because the UAE funding may not be forthcoming if Bavarian officials remain politically opposed.

End Summary.

AN ISLAMIC ACADEMY IN CATHOLIC BAVARIA?

¶2. (U) Benjamin Idriz, Imam of the rural Islamic Congregation of Penzberg (south of Munich) and IVLP grantee in 2007, has proposed an academy called the "Center for Islam in Europe, Munich" (ZIEM) aimed at educating imams in Germany, in the German language. At present, the Turkish umbrella organization in Germany, "DITIB" (Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs), in cooperation with "DIYANET," the office for religious affairs in Turkey, brings in imams from abroad, mainly from Turkey or Morocco, to serve in Germany. Most speak little or no German and often depart the country after four years. While it is estimated that there are currently 3.3 million Muslims who visit some 2,600 mosques and prayer rooms throughout Germany, there is virtually no indigenous education of Islamic clerics in German universities.

¶3. (U) Advocates for Muslim integration, including the

Protestant Church of Bavaria, have welcomed the ZIEM project, asserting the education of imams born and raised in Germany would be an ideal tool for better integration, as these imams would understand German society and the needs of the German Islamic community. Idriz presented a paper outlining his ideas, including Bachelor and Masters level courses designed to give students a solid religious education in cooperation with the Bavarian Ministry of Culture. Idriz stated the idea was to train tolerant, open-minded, highly-qualified and engaged imams who would "naturally" preach in German. The Emir of Sharjah in the UAE, already a benefactor of the Penzberg Community, reportedly has promised financial support to the new Islamic center, provided authorities approve the project.

BAVARIAN AUTHORITIES CONCERNED

¶4. (U) Former Bavarian MOI State Secretary Georg Schmid (he has recently taken a new post) had publicly called into question the claimed integration aims of the Academy. Schmid referred to alleged MG membership not by Idriz, but by leading Penzberg Community members, including Community Chairman Bayram Yerli and his wife and Vice Director of the Forum, Goenuel Yerli. MG is under observation by the Federal and Bavarian Offices for the Protection of the Constitution (OPC) as an extremist organization that represents a threat to the constitutional order. Schmid also pointed to an internal concept paper for the Academy that appeared to propose a more fundamentalist goal than the one announced publicly. The paper reportedly referred to the need for children to be educated in "pure Islam," and criticized the way European Muslims were being "to a certain extent compelled" to co-exist with a non-Muslim majority in society. Idriz acknowledged the concept paper existed, but dismissed it as one of various concept papers submitted by European

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counterparts and not adopted for the ZIEM academy.

¶5. (C) Separately, newly-elected Bavarian Minister-President Guenther Beckstein, who has not taken a public position on the matter, confided to the Consul General (while Beckstein was still Bavarian Interior Minister) that he supported Schmid's stance on Penzberg and the Academy, while acknowledging that Schmid may have also used the controversy to bolster his political profile. The CG noted Idriz's advocacy of a moderate form of pro-integration Islam, and Beckstein countered that "Idriz plays two different pianos." Beckstein also expressed discomfort with funding from the Emir of Sharjah.

¶6. (C) ConGen Munich met November 28 with Schmid's successor, Juergen Heike, and Wolfgang Remmelle, the OPC liaison officer to the MOI, to learn their views on Penzberg. Heike essentially echoed Schmid's and Beckstein's views, expressing a general distrust of Idriz and his congregation. Heike stressed the alleged MG connection, saying that Idriz had delivered a speech in 2005 praising MG's social net for its members. Heike continued that the MOI still considered Yerli to be an MG member, since he had yet to submit proof of his leaving MG, as he had promised to do.

¶7. (C) When asked what specific things Idriz could do to mitigate the MOI's concerns, Heike said Idriz needed to not only make statements distancing himself from terrorism, but from Islamic fundamentalism in general. Additionally, Idriz needed to publicly condemn MG and oust its members from his community. Heike told the CG: "They lie to us. Since they are convinced it's totally right to lie, to betray, and even kill unbelievers, this does not build confidence." When asked if there were any specific threats emanating from Penzberg, Heike said there were none. Remmelle added without elaboration, that there were indications of links between the Penzberg Congregation and a Bosnian terrorist group which was

attempting to expand its influence in Bavaria. We have scheduled a follow-on meeting with Remmelle for more information.

DISSENTING VIEWS

¶18. (C) Some working-level contacts in the Bavarian law enforcement community have confided to the Consulate that they view the Penzberg controversy as essentially a "political" issue that is being used by Bavarian officials to appeal to their conservative, largely Catholic, constituency.

Additionally, several Bavarian SPD and Green political figures have come to the defense of Idriz, criticizing the MOI's role in the controversy. While politicians from the governing CSU party have been largely silent on the issue, Bavarian Landtag (state legislature) President and CSU member Alois Glueck has warned against general suspicion of Muslims, and said that cooperation with the moderate forces of Islam is a top priority.

¶19. (U) Glueck met with Idriz at his Landtag office on October 16, and had what he described in a subsequent media interview as a "constructive" conversation. At the end of October, Glueck traveled to the UAE, where he met with the Emir of Sharjah (Glueck said the trip was planned well before the ZIEM controversy). Glueck told the press he had come away from his meeting with a positive impression of the Emir, whom he described as open, and as having distanced himself from fundamentalist Islam. Glueck added that he had no reason to believe the Emir had intentions that were contrary to Bavarian interests. Glueck, while generally supportive of Idriz and the Penzberg Congregation, has stopped short of publicly endorsing the ZIEM project, saying too many questions, particularly regarding public input, remain open.

WHAT'S NEXT?

¶10. (U) At this point, the Academy's fate is uncertain -- Idriz is planning meetings with Munich officials to seek necessary approvals from the city. He will also need the approval from the district government of Upper Bavaria. Technically, he does not need permission as such from the MOI to move ahead with the academy. However, the Emir of Sharjah reportedly has told him funding is contingent upon the support of the Bavarian government -- including the MOI.

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COMMENT

¶11. (C) The Penzberg Congregation has many attributes of a moderate Islamic community; however, misgivings persist among MOI politicians about whether the community's private messages are consistent with their public statements. ConGen Munich has engaged Idriz and his congregation since 2005 with the MOI's clearance, and sent Idriz to the U.S. on an IVLP this year. Our dialogue with the Penzberg community has won significant attention from the media and praise from opposition political figures. To expand our understanding of the community and the MOI's concerns, we continue to seek official information from local authorities at various levels. We suspect that the MOI's reaction reflects the conservative Bavarian government's general discomfort with any initiatives that, in Heike's own words, could "impact German politics and eventually transform German society." We will continue, however, to follow the Penzberg saga closely while continuing our cautious engagement with Idriz and his congregation for now.

¶12. (U) This report has been coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

¶13. (U) Previous reporting from Munich is available on our SIPRNET website at www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/munich/ .
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